

A Love Fest

By Christina Siciliano

Seafarers from the Ukraine, the Philippines, Germany, Spain, Poland, Croatia, Greece and Italy celebrate Christmas with traditions and customs that are rich and symbolic. For a glimpse of how they celebrate when they are at home . . . journey with me into the magical world of Christmas.

Christmas traditions abound. Here in Australia most of our traditions have come from other countries. The trimming of the Christmas tree, originated in Germany . . . presenting Santa Clause in a red suit was an idea conceived in America . . . and Santa coming down the chimney to fill stockings is a custom from the Netherlands. The Nativity Scene originated in Italy . . . while from England we have carols, turkey, plum pudding, mince pies and Christmas card writing . . . winged wishes to family and friends.

Increasingly many Australians choose to have a barbecue of prawns, steak, and chicken with perhaps ice cream or sorbet for dessert. Opting for the less formal is gaining in popularity.

In the Northern hemisphere it is winter, therefore much more suited to eating the heavy warming, festive foods.

The Ukrainian Christmas Eve Supper or Holy Supper brings the family together to share special foods. There are many customs and traditions which reach back to antiquity.

When the first star appears in the sky, believed to be the Star of Bethlehem, the family gather to begin supper. There are twelve courses, the first is always kutia, the main dish, then there is borsch, boiled dumplings, and a variety of fish, this is followed by uzvar, a stewed fruit drink.

A beautiful Christmas story comes from the Ukraine . . . a mother too poor to buy and decorate a tree, places a few nuts on a small tree outside the apartment block where the family live . . . the spiders on hearing the mother's prayer for her children hang their webs all over the tree. In the morning the sun's rays turned the dew coated webs to gold and silver.

The Moravian population of Pennsylvania hold a Love Fest . . . actually it is a Christmas Musical service where the congregation eat simple food . . .

sweet buns and coffee. Beeswax candles are distributed. This is because bees were once thought to have been made in Paradise. As the final hymn is sung the candles are raised to praise our Heavenly Father.

In Germany according to legend . . . on Christmas Eve all the rivers turn to wine . . . Christmas magic.

Traditional German celebrating and there is much to celebrate, begins on December 6 St. Nicholas's day (It is interesting to note that St. Nicholas is the patron saint of Seafarers). On December 21 there are delicious round iced currant buns called Thomasplätzchen. Christmas Eve is going to church, then later the presentation of the tree, which the mother decorates. Finally the presents are placed under the tree.

Each member of the family has a decorated plate loaded with fruit, nuts, chocolate, marzipan and biscuits; the mother rings a bell, whereupon the family enter the room. Carols are sung, sparklers lit and the Christmas story read. After this the presents are opened.

Christmas Eve "Dickbauch" is the time for eating . . . suckling pig . . . reibrei . . . white sausage . . . macaroni . . . salad and various regional dishes. On Christmas day there is a banquet of roast goose, cabbage, carrots, parsnips and pickles. A sweet finale is Christstollen, a long loaf of bread bursting with nuts, raisins, citron and dried fruits. Lebkuchen a spice bar, marzipan and Dresdenstollen.

Spain's most common Christmas tradition is the incredibly elaborate, Nacimintos (Nativity scenes). On Christmas Eve as the stars appear in the Spanish skies, oil lamps are lit sending out a warm Christmas glow.

Midnight Christmas Eve, ringing bells call families to "La Misa Del Gallo." The most beautiful of candlelit services is held at the monastery of Monserrat where a boys choir perform the Mass in one pure voice. Christmas Dinner is eaten after midnight . . . turkey with truffles, followed by caramel custard. Rejoicing continues through the night. An old Spanish saying is . . . "this is a good night, therefore it is not meant for sleep". Presents are distributed on the Epiphany January 6 when the three wise men pass leaving gifts.

Christmas Eve in Italy is a time for viewing Italy's artistic and elaborate manger scenes. Another tradition, is the burning of the yule log which must stay alight until New Years Day, legend tells how Mary enters humble homes while the inhabitants are at Midnight Mass, the blessed Mother warms her new born child before the blazing log.

Dinner consists largely of fish, there may be as many as ten to twenty dishes prepared.

Throughout Italy, the sweets are panettone a cake filled with candied fruit, torrone-nougat, and panforte-ginger bread with honey and almonds and hazelnut.

A supper of fish, usually herring, carp or pike is served on Christmas Eve in Poland. Other dishes are red borsch, mushroom or fish soup, sauerkraut, wild mushrooms or dried peas. There are also Polish dumplings with a wide variety of fillings. Kutia is served, dessert is fruit compote.

Christmas is a much loved feast in the Philippines. Prior to the Christmas celebrations there is a novena of dawn Masses, these Masses have their origins in Mexico, when the Pope was petitioned to allow open air Christmas Masses in order to accommodate the multitude of people who wished to attend. The request was granted . . . and the novena became known as "Misa Di Aguinaldo", as these Masses were held during the harvest season, it meant an early rise . . . four o'clock in the morning! . . . the tradition continues. After Mass there is usually ginger tea or salabat and the puto bumbong . . . a violet glutinous rice steamed in tubes served with sugar and grated coconut.

The novena ends on Noche Buena (Christmas Eve) with Midnight Mass . . . Misa Del Gallo . . . Christmas day is for present giving.

Christmas in Croatia means decorating houses with greenery, including a Christmas tree. Christmas Eve the yule log is placed on the hearth and straw is brought into the house, wishes are made upon the straw: dinner is usually fish. On the Dalmatian coast they serve dried salted cod. A braided bread made with nutmeg, raisins and almonds is fashioned into a wreath and placed on the table. Croatians view Christmas as a holy day of spiritual celebration – gifts are said to be brought by Baby Jesus.

Greece, they say is an oasis of non commercialism when it comes to Christmas. It is held as a traditionally solemn religious holiday. Carols handed down from Byzantine times are sung. On December 6 , the feast of St. Nicholas, melomacarona cookies are baked, sending forth a mellow aroma that announces that Christmas is on its way.

In Latvia Christmas Dinner is cooked brown peas with bacon sauce, small pies, cabbage and sausage. Portugal celebrates with a special Christmas Eve Dinner which is salted dry cod fish with boiled potatoes. While in Russia they eat cakes, pies and meat dumplings. Sweden's celebration meal includes pork, herring, fish and brown beans.

After all this eating, there has to be some drinking, Champagne and specially brewed beers are a popular choice. Then there is mulled wine, which is red wine with fruit, cloves and cinnamon, served hot . . . well not exactly suited to a Christmas in Australia, best to cheer with a cold VB. Cheers and a very Happy Christmas, especially to all the Seafarers who will visit our ports this Christmas. ❧